



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Ascension of the Lord | Year A B C



1510-1520. Garofalo
The Ascension of Christ



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Prayer

God of mercy,

You wash away our sins in water,

You give us new birth in the Spirit,

And redeem us in the blood of Christ.

As we celebrate Christ's resurrection

Increase our awareness of these blessings,

And renew your gift of life within us.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,

Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

One God forever and ever.

[Second Sunday of Easter, Morning Prayer, Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours, ICEL, Catholic Book, New York, 452]

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
Version 2.0

© Mary Birmingham,
2011. All rights reserved.

Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

Editor: Bill Huebsch

Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.

Liturgical Context

- ▶ The feast of the Ascension is an incredibly important feast; it is an integral element of the Easter event. While similar to the resurrection, its import and nuance is slightly different and is of extreme importance to our understanding of salvation history.
- ▶ We are not to consider the feast in a literal, historical manner. The focus of the feast is the exaltation of the risen Christ. Jesus is enthroned in heaven.
- ▶ Consider what we know from the Gospels. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day and returned to the Father. He appeared to his disciples after the resurrection, yet his appearances reflected his heavenly, altered state. Even though Luke and John relate the ascension and the resurrection separately they are considered one event. The reason they are regarded as separate entity is not to regard them as individual events but for the purpose of reflecting upon the importance and implications of each reality.
- ▶ In Luke's Gospel Jesus ascends into heaven Easter Sunday night or the next day. John places Jesus' ascension after his appearance to Mary Magdalene and Luke situates it forty days [symbolic number for divine revelation] after the resurrection in the Acts of the Apostles.
- ▶ The *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar* (#7) stresses the connection in this feast between the passion, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit. The Feast of the Ascension is a solemnity. In locales where it is not designated a holy day of obligation, it is moved to the next Sunday. Thus some episcopal conferences celebrate this feast on Sunday, replacing the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The feast is still celebrated forty days after Easter in order to allow proper time and space for prayer and meditation.
- ▶ The ascension is a critical theological feast as it celebrates Christ's entrance into glory. Jesus takes his place on the heavenly throne. Salvation is only accomplished and access to the gates of heaven is only possible after Jesus' return to the heavenly throne from which he came.
- ▶ The ascension is a reminder that Jesus' entered a new mode of existence and was victorious once and for all over death, thus fulfilling his divinely appointed destiny.
- ▶ Jesus' earthly, post-resurrection appearances ended once Jesus ascended to his Father. Jesus is his new mode of reality in heaven. The feast is a reminder of not only Jesus' accessibility and presence through the power of the Spirit but also his ineffable inaccessibility--presence in absence. Jesus is now the exalted Lord of the universe who reigns triumphant as the Christ and as Lord.
- ▶ The ascension is the prelude to the sending of the Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles reminds us that Jesus went to the mountain where he breathed his Spirit upon the world. He "poured forth" the Spirit for his work of ongoing redemption and continuation of the covenant he forged when he established his reign on earth.
- ▶ The ascension is a sure sign of the hope of the resurrection we all share. Because Jesus ascended to sit at his Father's right hand we will one day share the beatific vision with him in heaven.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

Reading: Acts of the Apostles: 1. 1-11

- ▶ The telling of the Ascension event in the Acts of the Apostles focuses on the implications for the church's mission and the future return of Jesus Christ. The new community is feverishly preparing for the mission to which it has been called. Ministers are commissioned and the community prepares itself to go forth.
- ▶ Authority and credence are given for the sending of the Spirit--Jesus, the Father and John the Baptist announced the coming of the Spirit.
- ▶ Echoes of Pentecost ring through the text. We are given a glimpse of Spirit as part of the Godhead—not just the force that extends power.
- ▶ The Spirit is a sure sign of God's grace and presence.
- ▶ The number forty signifies a theological reality—the time of God's revelation that is set aside for our contemplation and reflection.
- ▶ Acts anticipates and prepares for Pentecost but the perspective is broader than a considering it in terms of a one-time event. Pentecost is understood as an ongoing reality in the community of believers.
- ▶ The Acts of the Apostles reminds believers of the hope that Christ will save Israel in spite of its rejection of him. There is sad irony in the reality that those who should have understood failed to understand.
- ▶ Acts makes it abundantly clear that the work that goes forth is God's design, not human design.
- ▶ The text ends with Galileans being rebuked for looking heavenward rather than forward to the mission that lie ahead of them—a message as relevant for us today as it was then.
- ▶ We are all called to work to build the reign of God here and now as we await the future glory with God in heaven.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ How is this reading a word for you today?
- ▶ When you consider your own Christian community, in what way do you see the Holy Spirit active in the lives of the community, in your life?
- ▶ What are the implications for us when we reflect upon the reality that those who should have understood who Christ was failed to understand? How might we guard against a similar hard-heartedness?
- ▶ There appears to be urgency about going forth to proclaim the reign of God. Where is such urgency needed today? Why is that same urgency needed today? What are the obstacles to such urgency? What is the challenge for your life?
- ▶ What is the good news in this reading?

Second Reading: Ephesians 1: 17-23

- ▶ The letter to the Ephesians was probably written by one of Paul’s disciples.
- ▶ It opens with a prayer of thanks originating from an ancient liturgy’s prayer of thanksgiving.
- ▶ The letter prays for the community to grow in wisdom and knowledge of the risen and exalted Christ.
- ▶ We are filled with the brilliance of Christ’s light when we truly come to “know” God.
- ▶ Christ’s light is so brilliant within us that we can hardly perceive it.
- ▶ The reading praises the exalted and risen Lord who reigns triumphant over the universe.
- ▶ The glorified Christ reigns not only over believers but also over the whole world—even those who have yet to be awakened to his light.
- ▶ Believers recognize the voice of their heavenly Father and have a responsibility to introduce him to the world.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ In what way, if any, have you been aware of Christ’s light within you? Where is there evidence of that light?
- ▶ If Christ’s light exists within you, what are the implications for the way you live your life?
- ▶ If we are called to share that light with others and the scriptures insist that we are, what is the best strategy for doing that? In what way have you shared the Light of Christ with others? How might you share that light in the future? What are the obstacles?

Gospel: Luke 24, 46-53

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ Luke ends his Gospel recounting the ascension and he begins his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles picking up where he left off. The ascension signaled a new beginning. The focus is now on the Church.
- ▶ The ascension is the launch pad for the fledgling church.
- ▶ Jesus had to be exalted, return in glory to his Father and reign from his heavenly throne for the mission of the Church to go out into the world. Reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection—his Paschal Mystery—is the fulfillment of salvation history.
- ▶ The church now can go forth and witness to the salvation God accomplished through his Son, the Christ.
- ▶ The work can now begin—faith must be proclaimed and nurtured if doubt is to be overcome.
- ▶ The apostles were even slow to fully comprehend all that Jesus taught them. Aware of the daunting task before them, they now go forth, empowered by the Spirit to teach as Jesus taught them.
- ▶ Then and now the sharing and witness of faith and the sharing and witness of Scripture proclaims the salvation won for us by Christ.

- ▶ It is our responsibility to help keep the flame alive in the hearts of believers—to go forth no matter the cost.
- ▶ The scene at the end of Luke’s Gospel portrays apostles being given the divine commission to go forth, empowered by the Holy Spirit to “do” the work of making Church as they await his return in glory.

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What does it mean to you that you are to become the living word of God in the world? In what way have you been the living word of God in the world?
- ▶ How can you, one individual person, “go about the business of “making” church? What does it involve to make church? What attitudes, behaviors, actions are needed to accomplish Jesus’ command?
- ▶ What stands in the way of the task of making church? What attitudes or behaviors are obstacles to the business of “making” church?
- ▶ What do you need from the Holy Spirit if you are really to go forth as Jesus commanded? What are some ways that you can follow Jesus’ command in your own environment?
- ▶ What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

#1. I see the Holy Spirit powerfully active in the life of my community. A parish of four thousand families—all busied about the work of building the reign of God in our midst. It is a privilege to be part of such a Spirit-driven community. Many small communities gather to study Scripture, to pray and share faith, to contemplate upon the needs of the poor and broken in our world. Prayer, prayer and more prayer! The parish reaches out to the world's poor in profound ways—over a half a million dollars a year is provided for impoverished places around the world—Chile, Dominican Republic, Haiti, poor communities in the United States. The parish operates a social concerns office and thrift store committed to helping the disadvantaged. Prayer and worship drives the community. Liturgy is powerful and feeds the community for the work it is sent forth to accomplish. It is a thriving, Spirit-led community in which there is little time for division and discord. People are about the business of living, working and establishing the reign of God. I am humbled to be part of such an amazing place. The Spirit's presence is palpable!

#2. My prayer life has never been one in which I receive profound thunderous experiences of divine presence. Sometimes I complain that there is very little consolation.

God's presence always seems to come quietly, silently and imperceptibly in the stillness of quiet reflection or in looking back on God's action in my life. I have had brief, momentary glimpses, however, of a light so brilliant that all I could do is yield to its presence within. One afternoon I was simply walking in to the church to accomplish some task and I became acutely aware that God wanted my attention. I simply sat and remained quiet. The only way to describe the experience is to say it was a quiet encounter of divine love. God simply wanted to communicate his love for me.

It is in those moments that I long to remain on Mount Tabor and drink in the Divine Presence. Yet those precious rare moments are what propel me to go forth and become what God calls me to become—the living word of God in the world. St. Paul reminds us that life is about participation in the Christ who lives within. The letter to the Ephesians reminds me to become more conscious to the light that is within and contemplates more regularly on its power in my life. When I feel burned out and seem to be operating on my own steam I know I am not yielding to that presence.

#3. I am called upon to witness to the Christ event by the way I live my life. St. James said we are to be hearers and doers of the word. People come to Christianity as a result of attraction. “See how they love one another.” “See how they care for one another.” “See how they persevere in the face of suffering and persecution. The witness of our lives is the most important witness to the power of Christ we can offer.

I was once asked to come and witness to a woman's husband who was an atheist. I realized it was a daunting task. He promised his wife he wanted to be open but he simply could not believe in a God who would allow so much suffering.

Once I realized that I was but a vessel and the work was God's work I was less intimidated. I told the man that I could only witness to what God had accomplished in my life and I started to share stories. I witnessed to Jesus' promises for us and shared how powerfully Christ was active in the life of my family for without God I cannot imagine how we would have endured some of life's challenges we experienced. He told me that we could simply be strong people and that God was not necessarily the agent that caused everything I had shared.

Faith and doubt are strange bedfellows. I told the man he was correct. There are no proofs for the existence of God—only witnesses. But when taking my life as one complete tapestry I can see no other option than the hand of God in all the events.

He politely thanked me and told me he would pray for faith. I never heard from him again. I do not know if my efforts made one iota of difference. What I do know is I followed Jesus' command to share what I had been given. The rest was up to him.

Our church's documents on evangelization tell us that we are to indirectly witness by the example of our lives and directly witness by proclamation. We are called to do both. The results are in God's hands. Jesus sends us his Spirit to propel us forward in this holy endeavor.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Evangelization
Baptism
Prayer
The Church and Ecclesiology
Church Structure

Holy Spirit
Sacraments
Salvation
Revelation I or II
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

EVANGELIZATION

Jesus gives the divine commission to his disciples and ascends to his Father. We are called to go forth and share what Jesus has given us with those still asleep to his life within. Thus, the focus of today's doctrinal session will be what the Church teaches us about EVANGELIZATION.

BAPTISM

Jesus gives us the commission to go forth and baptize all nations. We are to share Christ's divine life with others. Baptism gives us access to Christ's ongoing life in the world---presence in absence. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the sacrament of baptism.

PRAYER

The letter to the Ephesians reminds us of the brilliant light of Christ that dwells within each and every one of us. We become aware of that light through our commitment to prayer. Thus, today our doctrinal focus will be on PRAYER.

CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY

Jesus invites his disciples into union with his Father and with one another. He promises to be with the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles focuses on the age of the church. The Church is commissioned to go forth. Today we will focus on the Church and what we mean by Ecclesiology.

CHURCH STRUCTURE

Jesus invites his disciples into union with his Father and with one another. He promises to be with the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles focuses on the age of the church. The Church is commissioned to go forth. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the structure of the Church.

HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus reminds his disciples that he will send the Paraclete in his absence. His Spirit will guide and strengthen the disciples and the Christian community after Jesus' death. Thus, today, the doctrinal focus will be the Holy Spirit.

SACRAMENTS

Jesus is present to us in the sacraments. Jesus promises to send his Spirit to go forth with his community of believers as they establish the reign of God in the world. We are strengthened to go forth through our participation in the sacraments. Christ's presence and union continues through the generations in the sacraments. Thus, today the doctrinal session will focus on the doctrinal issue of SACRAMENTS.

SALVATION

Easter is a time we meditate upon the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation accomplished through the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Salvation history comes to fulfillment in Christ, especially now that he has ascended to his Father. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the doctrinal teaching regarding SALVATION.

REVELATION Part I or II

What better time is there than Easter season to focus our attention on God's revelation to humanity? The second reading particularly focuses on God's revelation. Today's session will focus on God's revelation.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Easter is to the year what Sunday is to the week. Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.